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Standing up to bullies, at last

Bullies, time to hang it up. The Massachusetts Legislature has finally joined 42 other states in passing anti-bullying legislation, Gov. Deval Patrick signed the bill on Monday.

Every teacher, parent and student should by now be clear on anti-bullying rules - and repercussions - in place at their schools, since the suicide in January of Phoebe Prince in South Hadley and arraignment of several peers. This issue should have been addressed at the grassroots level even before the advent of a state law.

It's a matter of life and death.

What's your school doing?

An Ahern Middle School eighth-grade girl hospitalized for a week with stress attributed to bullying has played an active role in creating a safety plan that has helped bring about an accord between her family and school officials.

Concerted plans of action in Foxboro schools and elsewhere should mean that children who are bullied will have swift and responsive recourse.

"We need to change the way people look at this problem to reflect the message that bullying is child abuse by children," psychologist Jean Alberti was quoted by the Buffalo News. She has donated funds for a national anti-bullying study center at the University at Buffalo, her alma mater.

She's right. Bullying is abuse and it's dangerous.

Three students were suspended for bullying at an elementary school, the Baltimore Sun reports, after the mother of a third-grader said her daughter tried to kill herself. A Michigan couple speaks to schools in that state after bullying and suicide of their son, 16. A first-grader in New Mexico had brain surgery after a shoving match, and officials were trying to determine if bullying was involved.

Targets have, variously, been harassed and humiliated, hospitalized and pulled from schools by worried parents who feel they have no other choice but to exit.

"It's incredibly upsetting to me that the adults don't seem to have acted like adults," the governor said last month, in criticizing South Hadley school officials.

But, should we be surprised? After all, workplace bullying is also rife. Hallmarks are rumors and ridicule that damage a worker's stature, purposeful isolation, chronic snubbing and acts of disdain.

The Workplace Bullying Institute, a nonprofit educational organization, provides research showing victims can suffer panic attacks and depression, and once targeted, there's a 64 percent chance of losing their job for no apparent reason. Most workplace bullies are bosses, WBI reports, and bullying could not exist without the explicit or tacit approval from employers.

If adults are unable to behave with courtesy and respect, why would we expect children to do so?

Imagine what life is like for kids longing to be accepted by peers, who want to learn and excel, who want to move freely without being terrorized?

Who's going to stand up for them? And when? All of us, starting now and not a moment later.